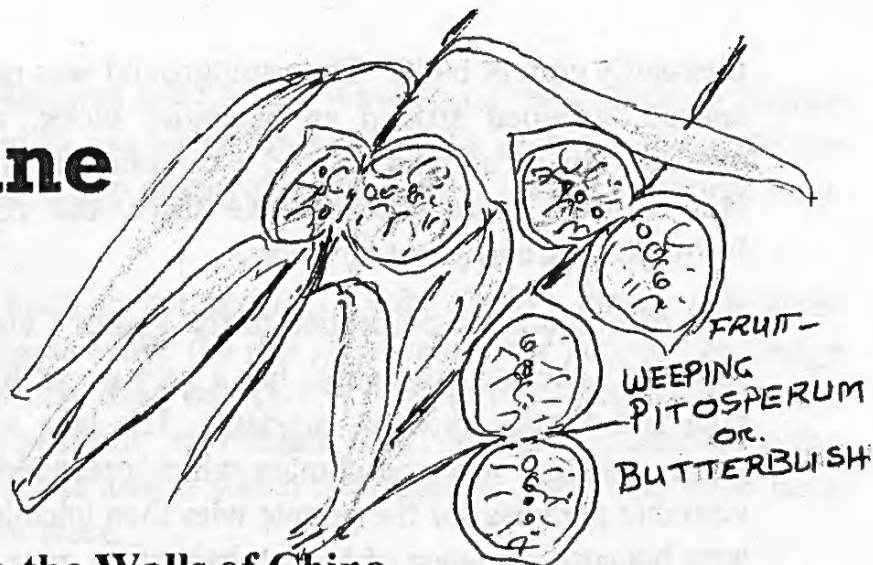


Castlemaine Naturalist

May 2000

Vol. 22.4 #266



To the Walls of China

With Maggie Oliver, Enid Chapman, Phee and George Broadway
and Margaret Badminton

Mungo National Park is located in the southwest of New South Wales. It lies 110 km N-E of Mildura and 150 km west of Balranald. We chose to go via Balranald, which is Maggie's old home territory.

After departing at different times and proceeding by various routes we all met up at a Balranald motel late on Sunday afternoon. Maggie and Enid had by then been out to visit the old homestead where Maggie grew up, and she was pleased to find that it has been taken over by people who are interested in restoring it and perhaps turning it into a district showpiece. We shared a pleasant meal at the Balranald Club, but contributed very little to the pokies revenue that evening.

Monday morning was cloudless and mild. After a brief stop at the Balranald supermarket to stock up on necessities we were on our way. From Balranald we took the Ivanhoe road, passing the gate to Maggie's former home about 20 km out. Shortly afterwards we left the sealed road for the road to Mungo, which had quite a reasonable surface, although we did stir up a fair amount of dust. Like most Mallee country, the scenery was varied. At times we traversed long stretches of bluebush plain, with the occasional patch of saltbush, or clumps of trees, Sugarwood and Belar, then there would be a stretch of Mallee country, dominated by Mallee euclalypts with Porcupine Grass, or again, sandunes with assorted Mallee vegetation - Pittosporums, Eremophilas, Exocarpus, Heterodendrum, etc. In these areas there is a great variety of shrubs and trees, always fascinating for the interested observer.

We arrived at Mungo National Park at about lunchtime. Margaret set up her camp in the campground, the rest of us shared a small self-contained cottage at Mungo Lodge, as advertised in the "Bird Observer". We took one of two which had two bedrooms, one room with double bed, the other with four bunks. There was also a kitchen and dining area, so we were very comfortable. And, of course, there was a bathroom with shower and toilet. An air conditioner and gas heater catered for seasonal extremes. The air conditioner proved to be very welcome during our stay, as the weather proved to be quite warm during the day, although

pleasantly cool at night. The campground was nicely laid out, with camp sites well spaced, grouped around an amenities block, a good supply of firewood was available for those who wanted a campfire (in the fireplaces provided, of course). Hot showers were not available there, but could be had over at the Visitor Information Centre, not far away.

After lunch we proceeded to the Visitor Centre, a new building on the western shore of Lake Mungo, which has a very good display explaining the history of the area and contains various artefacts. The lake system was last full about 20,000 years ago, and with the climate which prevailed at the time it must have been a veritable paradise for the people who then inhabited the area. In fact, the area is of note because evidence of human habitation goes back about 60,000 years, making it one of the oldest sites of human activity known. When the skull of Mungo woman was discovered a few years ago it caused great excitement among anthropologists, being one of the oldest known relics of modern *Homo sapiens*.

It was frustrating to find at the Visitor Centre that there were two piles of notes, one on flora, one on birds, listing species found in the park. Unfortunately these were inside a glass case with no access, with a notice to say that if they were required they could be obtained at the Parks office in Buronga - which happens to be 110km away. The Centre is mostly unattended, especially since the ranger in charge was transferred elsewhere.

So, having inspected the old woolshed, which is in pretty good order, we set off across the dry lake bed to the eastern shore. The bed of the lake is now a Bluebush plain, mostly of Black Bluebush, not to be confused with the Pearl Bluebush which grows on the higher slopes.

One of the main features of the park is the lunette, known as the Walls of China, along the eastern shore. This consists of deposits of wind-blown material which have in the past been blown up from the bed of the lake during alternating wet and dry periods. The oldest pink layers, known as Gol-gol deposits, were laid down about 100,000 years ago. Above them are brownish cream and white sands, constituting the Mungo units, laid down from 60,000 to 37,000 years ago when the lakes were full, and higher still are the grey clays of the Zanci units laid down from 37,000 to 18,000 years ago during a cycle of filling and drying of the lake. In the last 18,000 years the lake has been dry, and in this period some dunes have formed further to the east of the lunette.

At the foot of the lunette there is a bus parking area, toilets and a board walk to protect the fragile structure of the lunettes. Several areas were set aside for revegetation. However, one of the features of the lunette is the eroded surface with pinnacles of sand/clay maintained by remnant vegetation which holds the soil together. This is what gives the "Walls" their particular appeal. The main birds seen there were Wedge-tailed Eagle, Singing Honeyeater, and White-backed Swallow. After climbing the lunette we made our way back to the Visitor Centre for

afternoon tea, after which Margaret and George went round the Foreshore Nature Walk while the others waited to see which birds would fly past. On this walk the main excitement was meeting group of parrots, which, after careful checking, were declared to be Blue Bonnets.

As the sun set it was back to cottage for a G&T before dinner. Margaret opted to dine in the campground while the rest of us made our way to the Lodge dining room where a three course meal was served. No options - just soup, a roast of the day and dessert. Quite pleasant, but Maggie could not resist remarking to the waitress that she thought that the animal which provided the roast beef must have walked a very long way to get there.

The next day was spent in driving the self-guided motor tour of the park, a trip of about 70 km. This is mostly one way, so once begun it must be completed, as there is no going back. A pity, perhaps, as one of the best spots we found was shortly after the start at the Red Top Tank, where several bird species were in evidence. At first we thought we had found Yellow Chats until Margaret looked up their distribution map, when we found that Yellow Chats with black faces are in fact Orange Chats. In any case they were quite spectacular. At the same tank we also found White-browed Woodswallows.

After this stop it was up and over the dunes to the far east side, followed by a drive northwards, parallel to the dunes, passing through a variety of landscapes - at times bluebush plain, then nitre bush, Mallee sandhills or pine-Belar communities. Rosewood Rest sounded like a good place for morning coffee while lunch was had at the Round Tank picnic area and goat trap. There were no goats in the trap, which was not surprising, considering the large holes in the fence. Perhaps goats are no longer a problem, or, as in other aspects of Park management, there are insufficient funds for proper maintenance.

The next stop was at Vigars Well at the end of a short detour. At this point it is possible to walk up onto the dunes from the east if one has the strength. However, we were distracted by the sight of a White-winged Wren, and also by the rather warm conditions.

Returning to the main track we soon found ourselves driving along the dry bed of Lake Leaghur, which is the adjacent lake to Lake Mungo. The track then crosses the northern end of the lunette before crossing the bed of Lake Mungo to reach the remains of the Zanci station. Nothing is left of the homestead, but the stables are still standing as is the partly underground shelter which was built to allow the family some respite from the heat. At this point it is but a short distance to complete the circuit.

After a rather warm day it was very pleasant to be able to return to our cottage for a refreshing shower, followed by a relaxing G&T before dinner, which

that night was roast chicken, which proved to be somewhat more tender than the roast beef of the previous night.

We also found it a bit odd that the park literature referred to plants only by a common name, with no botanical names. I found plants with which I thought I was familiar from our time at Mildura called by other names entirely, which I found confusing. For instance, Weeping Pittosporum, *P. phillyreoides*, was labelled Butterbush. *Heterodermum oleifolium*, which we knew as Cattle Bush around Hattah, was here called Rosewood; perhaps it sounds a bit more romantic.

Birds seen -

Emu	Red-rumped Parrot	White-browed Babbler
Sparrowhawk	Mulga Parrot	Blue Wren (Variegated?)
Wedgetailed eagle	Blue Bonnet	White-winged Wren
Brown Falcon	White-backed Swallow	Chestnut-rumped
Nankeen Kestrel	Welcome Swallow	Thornbill
Crested Pigeon	Red-capped Robin	Yellow-rumped
Galah	Gilberts Whistler	Thornbill
Pink Cockatoo	Brown Treecreeper	Yellow Thornbill
White-browed	Singing Honeyeater	Spiny-cheeked
Treecreeper	White-winged Chough	Honeyeater
Yellow-throated Miner	White-browed	Orange Chat
White-fronted Chat	Woodswallow	Apostlebird
Magpie Lark	Grey Currawong	Grey Butcherbird
Magpie	Rufous Whistler	Pied Butcherbird
Mallee Ringneck	Willie Wagtail	Southern Whiteface
		Australian Raven

George Broadway

Magpie Feeding Frenzy

A colony of Red Meat Ants exists in a mound near our back door.

Ant colonies are made up of winged males, winged females and several subcasts of workers. Winged males and females fly from the colony at times suitable for mass mating.

A number of times we have observed Magpies having a noisy feast on these flying ants. They are not, however, in the least interested in the wingless ants on the ground.

This activity appears to be related to rainfall. For instance, on the 26th of March, after 84 mm of rain, and on the 14th of April after 31 mm of rain they began to leave the nest and fly about an hour after the rain had stopped. There had been earlier flights, but these were not recorded.

This "nature at work" is a bonus for the magpies, but a big negative for the ants.

John and Nina Cole

Bird Atlassing at Fryerstown

Lesley and I have conducted 2 hectare searches in a patch of bushland beside the Chewton-Fryerstown Road, near Spring Gully and in part of Fryerstown Cemetery. We make a count of species recorded in the 2 hectares over a period of 20 minutes.

The Spring Gully bushland has a tree cover of mixed box and stringybark, with abundant shrub layer, and has a shallow gully. The cemetery has some tall Yellow Gum, with some hollows. There is a varied ground layer - ground litter, grassy areas, Gold-dust Wattle and various introduced trees shrubs and smaller plants. There are some good stands of eucalypts in the paddock to the north, and bushland on the south.

Recorded in Forest only

White-winged Chough	1	0
Striated Thornbill	1	0
Grey Fantail	2	0
Grey Currawong	2	0
Brown-headed Honeyeater	2	0
Brown Thornbill	2	0
Buff-rumped Thornbill	2	0
Weebill	2	0

More abundant in Forest

White-eared Honeyeater	3	1
White-plumed Honeyeater	2	1
Scarlet Robin	4	1
Spotted Pardalote	2	1
White-throated Treecreeper	2	1

Equally abundant

Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike	1	1
Australian Raven	1	1
Yellow-faced Honeyeater	1	1
Grey Shrike-thrush	1	1
Grey Fantail	1	1

More abundant in Cemetery

White-naped Honeyeater	1	2
Magpie	2	3
Red Wattlebird	1	5
Crimson Rosella	2	7

Recorded at Cemetery only

Brown Falcon	0	1
Brown Goshawk	0	1
Horsfields Bronze Cuckoo	0	1
Wood Duck	0	1
Blackbird	0	1
Restless Flycatcher	0	1
Whistling Kite	0	1
Noisy Miner	0	1
Red-rumped Parrot	0	1
Starling	0	1
Eastern Shrike-tit	0	1
Rufous Whistler	0	1
Willie Wagtail	0	1
Musk Lorikeet	0	2
Long-billed Corella	0	2
White-browed Scrub-wren	0	2
Red-browed Firetail	0	2
Dusky Woodswallow	0	2
White-browed Woodswallow	0	2
Welcome Swallow	0	3
Brown Treecreeper	0	3
New Holland Honeyeater	0	4
Yellow-tufted Honeyeater	0	7
Yellow Robin	0	8
Blue Wren	0	8
Fuscous Honeyeater	0	9

The numbers give the average number of records per 10 visits. It is interesting that the varied habitat at the cemetery is visited by so many birds. Evidently mixed vegetation at the edge of a forest is an important habitat for many of them.

E Perkins

Birding at "Clarkesdale"

A few weeks ago Ken and I together with my brother Jim spent several days at the bird Observers' Club cottage at linton. A birdwatcher's paradise, we had lots of great sightings, including huge flocks, two to three hundred at a time, of my favourite bird, the Yellow-tailed black Cockatoo. What a racket!

There is a large rain barrel outside the kitchen window with tow long planks sticking out. We were treated each day to parade of birds coming in for a drink of water. This involved landing on the wood for a quick look round, then down the plank for a drink, making several trips to the tip to check all was safe. It was a marvelous chance for us at the window to observe close up without being seen.

One of the strangest was the brown Treecreeper, which landed on the plank, had a look around then walked backwards down the plank into the water, stopping for a drink while half submerged before walking forwards back up the plank. This was repeated several times. His drinking partners included Red-browed Finches, White-naped Honeyeaters, Crimson Rosellas, Galahs and New Holland Honeyeaters.

We really should try to organise a club outing over there again sometime.

Maureen Dredge.

Observations

- Natalie de Maccus has had one flower this year emerge from the patches of Greenhoods that she thought were sterile. It seems to be an Autumn Greenhood, *Pterostylus revoluta*
- Margaret Dunne has had Weebills nest in a large lavender bush at her place at Walmer, and they have raised two broods. However, when she took her grandchildren to show them the nest she found that it had disappeared completely and she is mystified. *Question - Does anyone have an explanation, or experience of this happening?*
- Again a report of Magpies feeding on European Wasps (the last one was two or three years ago). Ian O'Halloran, speaker for the night, told of watching Magpies "pointing" a wasp, then darting forward, backing off to eat it, and coming back again for more.
- Beverly Mary Hill has had a pair of Kookaburras at her place in James Street.
- Brenda Envall told of a juvenile Eastern Spinebill flying into the house window and stunning itself. Her son Tim rescued it and brought inside to recover. However it escaped when it recovered and flew around the room and had to be rescued a

second time - after it had flown into an empty milk jug! Tim released it outside and it flew away, apparently none the worse for wear.

- *Question - do Huntsman Spiders suspend on threads?* Margaret Willis had a spider suspended on a thread between her face on the bathroom mirror. Needless to say she got quite a fright, but is pretty sure that it was a Huntsman of some sort. *Does anyone know the answer to this one?*

- Walking through the Wattle Flat bush with the U3A walking group on 12/4 Rita Mills spotted a specimen of the Red Tip Greenhood, now known as *Pterostylus sp. aff. parviflora*. This small greenhood has several flowers facing the stem and, as the common name suggests, the tips of the petals and sepals are red-brown, the rest of the flower green and white striped.

- Barbara Maund has found a young Gecko in her front garden in early April. It appears to be living in a crack in the concrete path.

- Margaret Badminton reports that the Pied Currawongs are back on cue at the end of April, and the Flame Robins, two males and four females, are back in the sandstone rocks on the hill above the house. Margaret is curious as to where they are roosting, because they are there just on sunset, and there are no trees or bushes nearby.

Welcome to new member, Lesley Ryall.

FROM THE BUSINESS MEETING -

This meeting is open to all members, and is not a committee meeting as such, though usually only the committee attends. All paid up members are welcome to attend and contribute, and have voting rights.

Adopt-a-Highway Report - from Ken Dredge.

Another successful highway clean-up was held on Sat. April 15. Nine dedicated volunteers managed to collect a trailer full of rubbish despite the highway looking "not-too-bad".

If you can possibly make the next clean-up it would be greatly appreciated. We really need 12 - 16 volunteers to save some having to double up on sections. It only takes an hour of your time (less if more numbers) from 8.30 to 9.30 am.

Help needed!

- ✓ 1. Sat May 21 - **Swift Parrot Survey** Leave 27 Doveton St. at 8.30am. Bring drinks and snacks, and lunch and binocs! If you would prefer to just come in the afternoon, meet at the Red, White and Blue at lunchtime, but let someone know that you are meeting us there.

- ✓ 2. Sat and Sun, May 21-22. **Skydancers "Flora for Fauna"**. The club will have a display on the theme of the weekend, and we need appropriate posters and specimens; anything which shows the advantage to the native food chain in planting a native garden. If you can help please contact Ern Perkins on 5427 3124.

**CASTLEMAINE NATURALIST, May 2000
PROGRAMME**

EXCURSIONS General Meetings Are held in the Uniting church (UCA) hall, at 8.00pm on the second Friday of each month, except January. Entrances to the car parks are beside the Art Gallery and beside the Church building in Lyttleton Street. **Excursions** leave promptly at times stated, usually on the Saturday after the general meeting. There are NO excursions on TOTAL FIRE BAN days.

Business Meetings are held at 38 Campbell Street on the 4th Thursday of each month, except December, at 7.30pm. All members are invited to attend.

**VISITORS ARE ALWAYS WELCOME TO CLUB MEETINGS AND
EXCURSIONS**

Fri. May 12. **"Forecasting the Future"**. Speaker is Alan Reid. 8pm UCA hall.

Sat May 13 **Broken Bridge, Eddington**. Leader, E Perkins. Leave 13 Mostyn St. at 1.30pm.

Sat-Sun May 20-21 **Swift Parrot Survey**. Details p.7.

Sat-Sun May 20-21 **Skydancers "Flora for Fauna" weekend**. Saturday is Garden Day with John Clark and Geoff Sitch the speakers. Sunday is Land Care Day, speakers are Gary Sobey and Jason Horlock. Demonstrations throughout the weekend and the FNC has a display. (see p. 7) Contact Gary on 5474 2468 for further details. A flyer is available.

Fri. June 9. **Castlemaine Botanical Gardens** Speaker is Kevin Walsh. UCA hall, 8.00pm

Sat June 10. **A tour of the Gardens with Kevin**. Leave 13 Mostyn St at 1.30 or meet at the Rose Garden Car park at the gardens.

Fri. July 14. **Our favourite places of interest in Victoria**. You probably have a favourite nature spot that you like to visit, camp for a weekend or spend a week or two. Share it with the Club, with a few slides or photos to lure us, and info. on place, distance, camping grounds and facilities, or motel accommodation if you can. Put your thinking caps on and be ready to contribute.

Sat July 15. **Fungi, Bullarto Reservoir**. Leave 13 Mostyn St. at 1.30pm.

Thurs. Aug. 17. **Broom Pull**. Details to follow.

Something to think about - There is a real possibility of a Campout at Glue pot station in South Australia in the spring in either September or October. Chris Morris is looking into it. We will possibly spend three nights on Gluepot, but will need to have at least one overnight stop getting there and returning. Interested!?

Disclaimer - The opinions expressed in this newsletter are those of the contributor and not necessarily those of the club.

1999 Committee M. Dredge (President) ph 5470 6474E. Perkins (V.P. and Grievance Officer), G. Broadway (Sec.). ph. 5472 2513, J. Turnbull (treas.) ph. 5474 3005, R. Mills (N/L Ed. and P.O.), M. Oliver, C. Morris, K. Turner, Z. Thomas. B. Maund.

Subscriptions for 2000 -

Ordinary Membership: Single, \$22 Family, \$30

Pensioner or student: Single \$19 Family \$24

Supporting: \$31

The subscription also covers postage of the 'Castlemaine Naturalist'.

Castlemaine Field Naturalists Club Inc.
P.O. Box 324, Castlemaine. 3450.
Incorporation # A0003010B